Macho Man

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To the average American, seeing McDonald’s restaurants and materialistic billboards at every turn is nothing new. In a culture driven by materials and superficial values, things like nature and the worth of a hard day’s work can get lost in the shuffle. Most Americans simply don’t notice what the culture has become. But how does this culture seem to an outsider? Does someone from another place adopt the American way of life as their own or does this strict change in values make them feel uncomfortable? In the excerpt by Anita Desai, she answers this question by using symbolism, point of view, and the characterization of Arun as timid to characterize his experience in America as foreign and uncomfortable.

Just like McDonald’s symbolizes the obesity of America, Desai uses symbols in her story to stand for the overarching themes of American culture. Things that are completely normal to a native are pointed out, showing their foreign nature to Arun. Mrs. Patton throws Arun a “lipsticked smile,” carries her beach “equipment,” and passes by the “plastic gnome” cheerfully and routinely. These seemingly normal things, in the eyes of a foreigner, mean much more. The “lipsticked” smile represents the aesthetic obsession of Americans, while the beach equipment demonstrates the value seen in a serious day of fun rather than a day of work. The plastic gnome amidst the pure nature symbolizes the tendency of Americans to ruin everything good with a cheesy “plastic” touch. And after Arun has noticed all of these things, he begins to feel awkward and sweat, signifying his discomfort at such values. He can’t understand the American mentality, and when he is confronted with the representation of it, he feels even more alien and uncomfortable.

As Arun begins to feel uncomfortable on the trip to the beach, it seems as though he cannot express himself, due to Desai’s use of third person point of view. Since the story is not told by Arun himself, but rather an uninvolved third party, it creates the illusion that Arun cannot express himself in this foreign nation. When Mrs. Patton says that Arun must go to the beach, Arun doesn’t voice any objections, and seems silent the entire way to the beach. This further distances him from the expressive American Mrs. Patton, who sings on the journey. Had the story been written in Arun’s point of view, the reader would’ve understood his personal experiences and opinions more clearly. However, since it is written in third person, it emphasizes Arun’s distance from the American culture he finds himself in.

Through the third person narration, the reader does not see the thoughts and motivations of Arun; however, the general characterization of him by Desai as a timid creature of habit contributes to the portrayal of his uncomfortable experience. Since the story takes place on a Saturday, Arun “cannot plead work,” suggesting that he works every other day of the week, and would prefer to be working over doing something new. Later, when Arun is walking the path, he desperately desires the town’s “post office, its shops, its dry-cleaning stores and picture framers,” as opposed to the unfamiliar wilderness. With a character so loving of everything familiar, it comes as no surprise that his time in America has been new and uncomfortable to him. One might wonder why someone with his disposition would choose to live abroad, but regardless of why he is there, it is clear that his personality is sure to make him feel awkward in a foreign nation.

Anytime one finds oneself in a foreign nation’s culture, it is natural to feel uncomfortable. The cast differences between the cultures of India and America for example, are so striking that one may not even be able to bear the change. In the excerpt by Anita Desai, Arun from India, already a creature of habit, struggles to enjoy his time in America. Through this characterization as a creature of habit as well as third person point of view and symbolism, Desai characterizes Arun’s experience as foreign and uncomfortable.